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ABSTRACT

This digest briefly reviews the ways that working affects students, and describes ways that schools can partner with businesses to increase the educational benefits of working. The economic payoff for students who work in high school is well-established, including a positive association between the amount of high school work experience and employment or earnings a few years later. The opportunity to acquire skills at work can have positive effects on the development of student orientation toward work. The major potential cost of students' jobs is a negative impact on academic achievement, although research findings vary significantly on the extent of the detriment. Debates over the supposed benefits of work experience have resulted in increased interest in school-to-work initiatives in which education and employment are linked. General purposes of work-based learning are: (1) to provide for acquisition of knowledge or skills for employment; (2) career exploration and planning; (3) knowledge of all aspects of an industry; (4) development of work-related personal and social competence; and (5) improvement in student motivation and academic achievement. If work-based learning is to achieve these goals, it must be planned carefully and monitored by people who understand the work place and what is to be learned there. Teachers of academic subjects must believe that the program is worthwhile and must link the work-based aspects with instruction in formal academic subjects. Until it is determined that work-based learning can be extended effectively to college-bound students, efforts to promote work-based learning programs will be minimal, and students in those programs may feel stigmatized as less academically able. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

Learning and Earning:
The Value of Working For Urban Students.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education Digest # 128.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

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LEARNING AND EARNING: THE VALUE OF WORKING FOR URBAN STUDENTS

The effects on students of holding off-campus jobs has been debated for decades, with research findings available to support every view. Some students must work while they continue to attend school, regardless of possible negative consequences. Thus, there is a challenge for schools, and for employers concerned about the quality of its future workforce: to help youth find and retain part-time positions that meet their short-term financial needs and also provide them with meaningful learning experiences that enhance the effectiveness of their education.

This digest briefly reviews the ways that working affects students and describes how schools can partner with businesses to increase the education benefits of working.

The Effects on Students of Working

Benefits

The economic payoff for students who work while in high school is well established. In addition to immediate earnings, there is a positive association between the amount of high school work experience and employment or earnings a few years later (Stern et al., 1995). Jobs that provide greater opportunity for students to use and develop their skills also can have beneficial effects on future employment and earnings (Stern & Nakata, 1989). In particular, students' opportunities to acquire skills at work can have a substantial effect on their development of an intrinsic positive orientation toward work, especially if they work in their senior year as opposed to earlier (Stern, et al., 1990).

Costs

The major potential cost of student jobs is their negative impact on academic achievement, but research findings vary significantly on the extent of the detriment. Most evidence indicates that high school students working more than 15 or 20 hours a week suffer academically: they have lower grades, do less homework, are more likely to drop out, or are less likely to complete postsecondary education. Students who work fewer hours seem to suffer fewer negative consequences (Stern et al., 1995).

An analysis of the psychosocial aspects of work experience for high school students in Orange County, California, concluded that it "may make them economically rich, but may also make them psychologically poor" (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986, p.238). The researchers found that many working youth expressed a cynical attitude toward work; spent most of their pay on personal luxuries, or on alcohol, marijuana, and, for males, gambling; and admitted to illegal or immoral conduct, such as stealing merchandise or falsely calling in sick. These findings commanded widespread attention and began a more serious debate about the supposed benefits of work experience.

Work-Based Learning Programs

Given the disadvantages for students who work at non-school-related jobs, school-to-work initiatives in the 1990s, particularly local partnerships funded by the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act, are placing a high priority on developing work-based learning (WBL) opportunities for students (Hershe et al., 1997). Preliminary findings indicate that school supervision of students' work experience may increase its educational value. Overall, for WBL students, in comparison with those working at other jobs, there was a decrease in the negative association between working long hours and grades. For WBL students who were being prepared for employment rather than college immediately post-high school, future earnings were higher than for other working students (Stern, Finkelstein, Urquiola, & Cagampang, 1997).

The general purpose of WBL is to provide students with a work experience that will have long-term educational and vocational benefits. Programs can have a variety of objectives, although given constraints on students' time, it is not possible to maximize all of them simultaneously. Therefore, different programs emphasize different goals. The following are common components of programs whose effectiveness has been demonstrated (Urquiola et al., 1997):

Acquisition of knowledge or skills for employment in particular occupations or industries. This is the main purpose of traditional apprenticeships and other forms of on-the-job training. Learning by doing, under the guidance of an experienced supervisor, develops competencies necessary to do the job. In the 1990s, this traditional practice is being placed in a lifetime career perspective, because jobs and skill requirements change frequently. New skill standards for various industries and occupational clusters now include "core competencies" or "foundations" to enable workers to progress and adapt as conditions change (Klein, 1996).

Career exploration and planning. The idea of "career majors" in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act is intended to create a coherent sequence of learning and work experiences to make youth's journey through school and various kinds of early work experiences more connected and purposeful, and to increase their chances of eventually finding rewarding work. Thus, WBL allows students to sample different kinds of work, to understand how they might fit into each, but without necessarily making a long-term commitment initially. For example, many local WBL programs allow high school students to start with brief job shadowing visits that lead to longer experiences later (Pauly, Kopp, & Haimson, 1995).

Knowledge of all aspects of an industry. This program component is intended to ensure that students learn more than the skills needed for specific entry-level jobs. Providing students with experience in all aspects of an industry or industry sector integrates academic and vocational education, empowers them to make career choices, prepares them to adapt to technological change, and equips them to play an active part in the economic development of their local communities (Jacobs, 1995). School-based enterprises, as compared with non-school enterprises, offer some advantages as work settings where students can learn about all aspects of an industry. Because their

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main purpose is educational, they can give students better opportunities for learning, doing a range of tasks, and working in teams; and more room to experiment and make mistakes.

Development of work-related personal and social competence. Beyond industry-specific knowledge, students need to develop a broader set of capacities—sometimes termed generic work skills, core competencies, or transferable skills—that are desirable in most or all work situations. A comprehensive list of such capacities was developed by the U.S. Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). The Commission's framework consists of a three-part foundation, then five general competencies. The three-part foundation comprises basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities. Beyond this foundation, the Commission sketched competencies along five dimensions: resources, interpersonal relations, use of information, understanding systems, and employing technology. Basic skills have been identified as ninth grade reading and mathematics, solving semi-structured problems, working in groups, oral and written communication, and the ability to use computers (Murnane & Levy, 1996).

Improvement in student motivation and academic achievement. Although improving students' performance in school may be removed from WBL's traditional goal of teaching vocational skills and knowledge related to particular occupations, it is a reasonable, and even desirable, objective. While WBL by itself has not been shown to raise students' academic achievement (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997), the negative effects on achievement of working long hours might be mitigated by more closely aligning students' work and school experiences.

Further, research has demonstrated that providing some kind of "contextual" or "situated" learning opportunities improves student understanding and retention of academic subject matter (Raizen, 1989). Thus, WBL experiences that provide students with an opportunity to solve practical problems that arise in the context of productive activity can enhance their overall motivation and achievement as it also provides a vocational education.

Improving Work-Based Learning

If WBL is intended not only to expose students to the workplace and give them an opportunity to acquire specific procedural know-how, but also to accomplish any of the broader purposes described here, then it must be carefully planned and monitored by people who understand both the work setting and what is to be learned there. Steinberg (1997) spells out "six A's": authenticity, adult connections, academic rigor, applied learning, active exploration, and assessment.

To ensure that WBL becomes an integral part of the curriculum, teachers of academic subjects have to be persuaded that the program is worthwhile for themselves and their students and become involved. To serve broader educational purposes and a broader cross-section of students, WBL will have to be linked to instruction in English, mathematics, science, foreign language, and social studies. Sending non-vocational teachers to spend some time in workplaces outside the school may help them find practical applications for their subject matter; in fact, some school-to-work partnerships are now providing this kind of opportunity through summer internships and other arrangements.

It is also necessary to examine how WBL can enhance the education of students who are already high achievers and augment the college preparatory curriculum. Until it is determined that WBL can be effectively extended to college-bound students, efforts to implement programs and expand those in existence will be minimal, and WBL students may feel stigmatized as less academically able (Pauly et al., 1995).

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